



RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION

2023–2025 Strategic Plan

Approved by the Board of Directors on December 8, 2022

Prepared by Hoffmann Consulting

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Executive Summary

The **Rail Passengers Association** (RPA), also known as the National Association of Rail Passengers, is the nation's largest advocacy organization for passenger rail. RPA serves as a voice for train passengers to policy makers, working for more and better passenger rail everywhere and for everyone.

Building on the historic opportunity for passenger rail through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, RPA embarked on a strategic planning process to continue its policy successes while building a strong foundation for future sustainability. Through this process, RPA has defined five priorities for 2023–2025:

- **Expand and improve passenger rail service to more places for more people:** RPA has an opportunity to build on its policy achievements, starting with the use of IIJA funds, to expand and improve passenger rail and meet the needs of all of its constituents. These mission-focused goals are the center of the plan, and all other goals are built to support these priorities.
- **Grow the coalition:** A broad and diverse coalition of support is needed for both effective advocacy and financial sustainability, and RPA has faced a gradual decline in membership in recent years. To deliver on its policy agenda, RPA has built a set of strategies and tactics to reverse this trajectory, grow the coalition and enable future success.
- **Diversify revenue to strengthen the financial position:** After several challenging financial years, RPA has been able to approach break even through effective fundraising and operational efficiencies. A focus on diversification to foundation and industry sources while building on existing individual support and earned revenue will give RPA the resources to expand the coalition – and fight for a better rail network – while ensuring it is sustainable for the long-term.
- **Invest in staff success:** RPA's team is very lean, and the current operational infrastructure is not prepared to support growth and expanded fundraising. Targeted investments in the people and the systems they use are necessary to achieve the above priorities.
- **Strengthen the governance structure:** RPA's unconventional structure presents barriers to success on the above strategies. Aligning the organization with industry standards for governance will enable the Board to provide more effective oversight and strategic guidance and the Council to better deliver on its intended purpose of bringing together local, regional and national advocacy efforts.

About the Plan

How to Read this Document

Any plan for where you want to go in the future needs to be grounded in a shared understanding of where you have been in your past and where you are right now. This plan was built based on that philosophy, starting with an analysis of RPA's current state and landscape. Accordingly, this document starts with an overview of that current state.

Strategy is the means to achieving the mission and vision of any organization. Early in the planning process, the Committee reviewed the mission and vision statements of RPA and recommended updated language to improve the clarity on where the association is going. Those proposed mission and vision statements are presented next. All of the strategic priorities and action plans that follow should be read through the lens of achieving that mission and vision.

The plan has defined five strategic priorities for 2023–2025, which are presented in the following section alongside their component objectives. They are listed as:

Priority 1

Objective 1.a

Objective 1.b

Priority 2

Objective 2.a

Each objective is intended to represent an actionable item toward the accomplishment of each priority, and each has at least one measurable performance indicator to track RPA's performance on the plan. The Board and the President/CEO should regularly review and discuss these strategic priorities and objectives.

Within each objective, the Committee and staff have worked together to define action items as an operating plan for the next 12–24 months. These action plans are detailed in the appendices to this document. With the exception of action plans focused on Board governance, the detail of these action plans and performance on them are typically the responsibility of the President/CEO. These operating plans represent an evolving document to be revisited regularly by the staff team to evaluate performance and adjust tactics as needed to ensure the strategic priorities are achieved.

About the Committee on the Future

This plan document is the product of seven months of work by RPA's Committee on the Future, which includes the following individuals:

Committee Chair: Thomas Girsch (*Board Vice Chair, Massachusetts*)

Committee Members:

- Dan Bilka (*Director, Colorado*)
- Harvey Bowen (*Board Vice Chair, Washington*)
- Ken Briers (*Past Board Chair, District of Columbia*)
- George Chilson (*Past Board Chair, California*)
- Ron Kaminkow (*Representative, Nevada*)
- Peter LeCody (*Past Board Chair, Texas*)
- Jim Mathews (*President & CEO*)
- Meredith Richards (*Board Chair, Virginia*)
- Gene Skoropowski (*Member, Florida*)
- Steve Strauss (*Representative, New York*)
- Phil Streby (*Director, Indiana*)

About the Facilitator

RPA engaged Hoffmann Consulting, LLC (www.hoffmann.consulting) to serve as an objective third party evaluator, facilitator and resource on best practices in the not-for-profit industry. Hoffmann Consulting is a boutique consulting firm focused on helping mission-driven organizations plan for their future: developing strategy, designing and launching new programs, growing their businesses, evaluating existing operations, and strengthening their infrastructure. Their client base spans both not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, with a focus on organizations in the advocacy, health and human services, education, and workforce development sectors. Its Principal, Jon Hoffmann, led this planning engagement and can be reached at jon@hoffmann.consulting.

The Planning Process

The strategic planning process began in May 2022 with an environmental scan and capacity analysis of the organization. This work included:

- Detailed document review and analysis, including: past financial and fundraising performance; external communications such as policy papers; past strategic planning priorities; and governance documents such as board membership, board policies, and bylaws.
- Survey of the Board of Directors, receiving 9 responses out of 15 for a 60% response rate.
- Survey of the Council of Representatives, receiving 25 responses out of 95 for a 26% response rate.
- Survey of current Members, receiving 403 responses out of 5,872 for a 7% response rate.
- Survey of recent donors, receiving 102 responses out of 2,335 for a 4% response rate.
- Interviews with 18 individuals, including members of the Committee on the Future and selected outside stakeholders.
- Retrospective meetings with the entire staff and key volunteers.

This analysis was reviewed and affirmed by both the Committee on the Future and the Board of Directors in separate meetings. Following that, the Committee and facilitator worked collaboratively to develop and refine a set of strategic priorities for 2023–2025. These draft priorities were reviewed with the Board of Directors in September 2022 and the Council of Representatives in October 2022. Incorporating the feedback from members of the Council, the facilitator and the staff team then worked to develop tactical, operating plans to chart a set of actions to achieve those goals.

Every step of the planning process was intentionally broad and inclusive to ensure a wide range of perspectives on the association are represented. The following strategic priorities and action plans are the result of this collaborative effort. On November 29, 2022, the Committee on the Future unanimously recommended this plan to the Board of Directors, which approved and adopted the plan at its December 8, 2022 meeting.

Current State

All stakeholder groups – members, donors, the Council of Representatives, the Board of Directors, and the staff – generally agree that the Rail Passengers Association is at a crossroads.

The organization has achieved significant policy wins in recent years, culminating with the authorization of \$66 billion in investment in passenger rail through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. RPA played a critical role in the structure of the rail investments in that legislation, which is a reflection on the performance of the staff team, volunteer advocates, and the strength of relationships the association has in the media and with policy makers. Looking toward the future, these successes create opportunities for RPA to continue to shape how passenger rail operates, including helping states access these federal resources.

These successes were achieved despite a period of internal challenges. Prior to 2020, the organization faced financial deficits, culminating in an operating loss of more than \$500,000 in 2019. In response, RPA dramatically reduced operating expenses, including the size of the staff team, and made targeted investments in fundraising capacity. These changes brought the organization to nearly break-even in 2020 and 2021.

Financially, RPA remains very reliant on member and individual donor revenue, which presents significant risks to the association given the current period of high inflation and the potential for a recession in 2023. The reduction in operating expenses have also hampered organizational effectiveness, limiting staff capacity and creating barriers in the systems they use.

RPA's governance structure, consisting of the Board of Directors and the Council of Representatives, is unconventional and has also created challenges for the association. Historically, RPA (then known as the National Association of Rail Passengers) had a much larger Board including representation from all states. However, as the configuration of the Board at the time was not in compliance with Illinois law, the organization revised its bylaws and created the Council of Representatives, which retained some governance responsibilities that are typically reserved for the Board of Directors, including electing Board members and revising the bylaws. The current Board is very involved in day-to-day management, including the activities of the staff team. The Council has struggled to recruit participants to fill every seat and has difficulty reaching quorums to fulfill its governance duties. Both bodies have been a source of significant conflict in recent years that has impacted staff, including a contentious Board election in 2022.

These themes are summarized below through the frame of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.

Fig. 1: SWOT Analysis of RPA in 2022

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engaged, passionate membership ● Talented staff team and consistent leadership ● Relationships in media and Capitol Hill ● Policy wins and influence 	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Financial inconsistency, driven by a lack of revenue diversity and declining member numbers ● Limited capacity of staff, supporting systems, and infrastructure ● High conflict culture, particularly in governing bodies ● Lack of diversity and representation of all rail users
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continue recent policy wins, including appropriation of authorized funds and shaping rail map expansion ● Leverage policy successes to attract new allies and funders 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Risk of political change and decreased support for passenger rail investment ● Interests opposed to mission: fossil fuels, auto industry, freight rail ● Uncertain economic and donor landscape post-pandemic ● Long-term trends challenging membership organizations

This assessment was reviewed with the Committee on the Future, the Board of Directors, and the Council of Representatives during the planning process. The Committee used this understanding of the current state of the organization and its landscape to drive the development of strategic priorities.

Mission, Vision and Values

As part of the strategic planning process, the Committee on the Future revisited the mission and vision statements of the association. The Committee agreed that while the existing statements are factually accurate, the language is not effective as a messaging tool. Growing the coalition of RPA is central to the plan, and having language that clearly communicates why the association exists and what it works toward is critical to success.

The Committee recommends the following revised mission and vision statements:

***The mission** of the Rail Passengers Association is to expand and improve passenger rail service to more places for more people.*

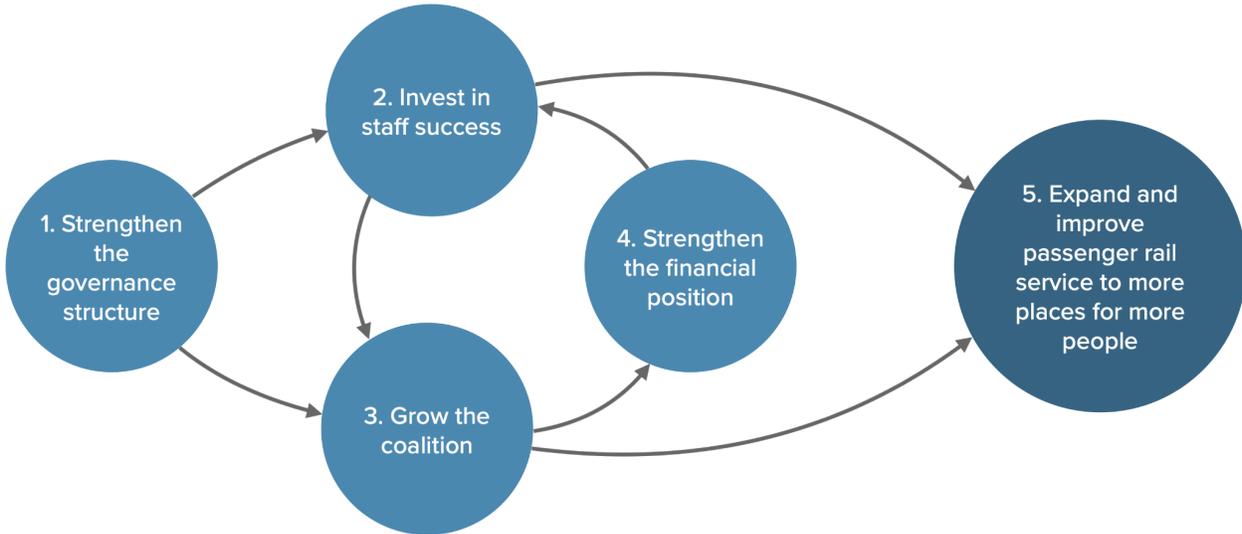
***The vision** is a passenger rail system that works everywhere for everyone.*

Every component of the strategic and tactical plans that follow build toward achieving this mission and vision.

2023-2025 Action Plan

RPA’s strategic plan includes five primary goals, all of which are necessary to deliver on the mission. These goals are designed intentionally to be related and support one another. The order they are presented does not represent a hierarchy of priority or the sequence in which they should be tackled; instead, all priorities will require focused effort throughout the duration of the plan. Each priority supports the others, as shown in the graphic below.

Fig. 2: Strategic Plan Priorities for 2023–2025



The following overview presents these goals, objectives, and the rationale leading to their inclusion in the plan. Details on action items and timelines are available in the attachments at the conclusion of this document.

1. Strengthen the Governance Structure

Why it matters:

RPA's unconventional structure presents a series of challenges: too much focus on the details of operations and micromanagement of staff, does not adequately support policy advocacy efforts, and creates barriers to recruiting new leaders to the coalition.

Where we are going:

The Board of Directors operates in line with industry best practices and provides strategic guidance and oversight of the association. The Council of Representatives focuses on state and regional organizing, outreach, and advocacy. Together, these roles for both bodies will support success in all of the other plan objectives.

How we get there:

1a. Improve Board functioning through development, diversity, and targeted recruitment. As the RPA Board currently consists of organizational members, experience in Board governance varies. Standardized training and onboarding will ensure all Directors have the tools they need to be effective, and routine assessments of board performance using standardized tools can establish a baseline for performance and track progress. Targeted recruitment of new members to bring both diversity and experience will strengthen the Board, and including representatives from industry and labor will help to create growth opportunities for the organization.

1b. Reform the bylaws to better align with industry best practices. RPA's bylaws currently have an unconventional division of responsibilities and are prescriptive as to how the organization operates. Bylaws reform will enable the Board and the Council to better meet their stated purposes: organizational governance for the Board and bringing together local, regional and national efforts into effective advocacy for the Council. These bylaws revisions include:

- Place responsibility for bylaws changes with the Board of Directors
- Change the Board election and appointment process so that industry and labor partners may be included
- Define new responsibilities for the Council of Representatives to focus on outreach and advocacy

- Move operational details from the bylaws to policies and procedures, reducing the frequency with which the bylaws are amended and the associated time burden

1c. Build on Council's role in advocacy, outreach and mobilization. In addition to the structural change in the Council's responsibilities, activities throughout this plan are focused on better utilizing the time, talent, and passion of Council members to power effective advocacy. This work will include:

- Creating a leadership structure and defined roles within the Council
- Formalize and develop partnerships and coordination between local and state advocacy coalitions
- Providing training and resources on effective advocacy, including the use of the office space in Washington, DC as a meeting space for the Council, regional partners, and affiliated coalitions

This framework is intended not to replace the Council but build on its strengths, creating a stronger and more unified front to influence federal legislative policies and develop active and sustaining partnerships with local, state and regional efforts around the nation.

2. Invest in Staff Success

Why it matters:

The current staff team and operational infrastructure is very lean. An investment in systems and people is needed to effectively pursue the mission, recruit and mobilize stakeholders, advocate on policy priorities, and achieve the other objectives in this plan.

Where we are going:

The association's operations are both efficient and effective, giving the team the resources they need to grow the association and continue its record of policy successes.

How we get there:

2a. Improve organizational infrastructure, with a focus on technology and communication systems and processes. Replacing core systems, including the contact record management and mass email platforms, will streamline staff work, support growth and effective communications. While some of these systems will require an initial investment to implement, these changes will have a neutral or positive impact on the organizational bottom line in direct costs while making the staff team more efficient and effective.

2b. Invest in culture and the work environment. The governance reforms outlined above are intended in part to refocus the governing bodies on strategy and oversight, rather than management of operations. Doing so will reduce instances of micromanagement of staff by Board members and overly prescriptive direction on the tactics of how RPA operates. RPA will also work internally on improving human resource practices, with a goal of reducing staff turnover. Finally, RPA will explore alternative office space in Washington, DC to take advantage of the changing real estate market and create a better space for in-person work while generating significant operational cost savings.

2c. Grow the staff and volunteer team as resources allow. Growing the organization is going to require additional capacity from both staff and volunteers. Administrative bandwidth is one of the current limitations of the staff team. Adding a Chief Operating Officer or Chief of Staff role would help to reduce outsourced functions, improve administrative effectiveness, improve coordination across the staff team, and enable the CEO to refocus on strategic issues, policy advocacy, and financial success.

3. *Grow the Coalition*

Why it matters:

RPA has seen a gradual decline in membership over recent years. Having a broad and diverse coalition of supporters, including members, individual donors, and organizational stakeholders, is essential to both effective advocacy and financial sustainability.

Where we are going:

RPA is a diverse coalition that represents everyone with a stake in passenger rail in the United States.

How we get there:

3a. Continue to engage existing stakeholders with effective communications. RPA has a tremendous asset in its current members and donors. They bring talent, volunteerism, and financial support critical to the RPA's policy successes. While the title of this goal is "growth," keeping the current stakeholder base engaged is also essential. To get there, RPA will focus on effective communications, including through the quarterly magazine, and incorporating members' feedback in a push for a passenger bill of rights.

3b. Outreach to new members and donors. Reducing barriers to membership and targeting outreach and recruitment events will focus on drawing in new individuals to the RPA coalition. The goal here is not primarily financial: while individuals are the primary financial source of support for RPA, this growth is focused on advocacy. This outreach includes all types of riders: from long-distance to local transit. Large numbers of advocates across the country are critical to mobilizing for calls to action and having the scale to get the attention of policy makers. The new role of the Council here is critical to building new partners and supporters.

3c. Engage industry, labor, and other allied causes. RPA has missed opportunities for natural allies, including the rail equipment industry, the labor organizations whose members keep the trains operating, and the environmental movement. Some of these parties, especially the equipment industry, have a good business case to support RPA's advocacy. Intentional and targeted outreach here to reimagine an organizational membership model will help to gain partners in advocacy as well as critical financial support. The governance reforms to expand Board membership is also an intentional component of engaging these groups in RPA.

4. Strengthen the Financial Position

Why it matters:

After several challenging financial years, RPA has been able to approach break-even in recent years. Continued revenue growth will enable the necessary infrastructure investments while supporting organizational sustainability. As individual members and donors provide the majority of revenue for RPA, diversification is needed to reduce risk.

Where we are going:

Consistency in revenue from existing sources together with targeted growth will enable year-over-year budget growth, improve liquidity, and build the Strategic Investment Fund.

How we get there:

4a. Revenue growth and diversification focused on corporate sources. As outlined above, there is a clear business case for corporations working in the rail industry to want to support advocacy to improve the rail system. RPA has seen year-over-year growth here since 2020, and continued focus will help to further diversify and strengthen RPA's financial picture.

4b. Revenue growth and diversification focused on foundation sources. RPA has historically had little support from the foundation community. The organization has fundamental work to do in the other areas of this plan (growth, impact, and governance) to be more attractive to foundations, but intentional efforts to build toward foundation support will help support long-term sustainability.

4c. Build consistency in existing and future donors and members. More effective development efforts will solidify the current support base, advance existing supporters toward major gifts, bringing more consistent revenue to improve both profit-and-loss performance as well as liquidity. Targeting these efforts will reduce the number of solicitations to each individual, improving staff efficiency and reducing donor fatigue.

4d. Build on existing earned revenue opportunities. RPA has the foundation of an effective research program generating earned revenue. Looking toward the implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, opportunities are already presenting themselves for research and economic impact studies. Opportunistic growth here will further diversify and strengthen RPA's revenue sources.

5. Expand and Improve Passenger Rail Service to More Places for More People

Why it matters:

Every strategic plan should focus on how to achieve the mission.

Where we are going:

RPA builds on its historic policy achievements, starting with the use of IIJA funds, to continue to expand and improve passenger rail and meet the needs of all of its constituents.

How we get there:

5a. Grow access through new routes and improved frequency of existing service.

The Federal Railroad Administration's Corridor Identification Program presents a timely opportunity to shape the development of the rail map and assist states to access federal resources. RPA will also work to include its stakeholders in Long-Distance Ridership studies to shape the performance of those services. As routes and service changes and evolves, RPA will also continue to focus on communicating those changes – and advocacy opportunities – to its stakeholder base.

5b. Improve performance: satisfaction, safety, timeliness, and equipment quality.

RPA will focus on continuing to have a seat at the table, including working groups and advisory boards that shape how rail operates in the United States. RPA will continue to give voice to its members in the equipment procurement process, including a focus on accessibility. This focus includes calling attention to issues in rail service and working for a passengers' bill of rights.

5c. Develop political champions. RPA needs to build more grassroots leaders and champions to expand and improve service. Refocusing the Council of Representatives on its stated purpose of linking local, regional, and national efforts is focused on exactly that. Based on those governance changes, the RPA Board, Council, and staff will work collaboratively to build that structure and create pipelines to draw new people into leadership and drive this advocacy agenda forward.

Next Steps

The Board of Directors approved this plan at the December 8, 2022 meeting. Approval of this plan may bring an end to the planning process, but that is when the real work begins.

This plan includes defined action items, detailed in the attachments, to begin work across all five priority areas. Many of these are ready to kick off in the first quarter of 2023, including activity by the staff team, volunteers, Board, and Council. The governance priority will be an immediate focus, as it supports the success in other areas. The Committee recommends using the Spring Council meeting to continue developing the details of the governance actions, with an immediate focus on shifting responsibility for the bylaws from the Council to the Board.

The action plans are focused primarily on the first 12-24 months. RPA is encouraged to treat the action plan as a living document: the five priorities may remain consistent, but the actions can and should evolve. Revisit and monitor performance on the metrics across the plan, be open to adjusting tactics as necessary to achieve success, and develop new action plans as initiatives are successfully completed.

This plan is ambitious, but with the help of everyone who is a part of the Rail Passengers Association, it is achievable: together, we can expand and improve passenger rail service to more places for more people.